



SUPPORT FOR AND DEVELOPMENT OF WELL-BEING THROUGH TRANSITIONAL OBJECTS AND RITUALS IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

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Abstract/Izvleček

Well-being is essential for pupils' academic and personal growth. Since schools are central to children's lives, they must provide a safe environment that supports emotional needs. This study explores how primary school teachers use transitional objects and rituals that help children adapt to school and feel secure. Findings reveal that teachers employ these tools intuitively, often without theoretical grounding. Despite their informal use, these practices positively influence pupils' adaptation and the classroom climate. The study underscores the importance of integrating transitional elements into educational practice and calls for enhanced teacher training focused on emotional well-being and its role in early education.

Keywords:

well-being, primary education, transitional object, transitional ritual; transient object.

Ključne besede:

dobrobit učencev, osnovnošolsko izobraževanje, prehodni objekt, prehodni rituali; nadomestni prehodni objekt.

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Podpora in razvijanje dobrobiti učencev skozi prehodni objekt ter rituale v osnovnošolskem izobraževanju

Dobro počutje je ključno za učni in osebnostni razvoj učencev. Ker so šole osrednji del otrokovega vsakdana, morajo zagotavljati varno okolje, ki podpira njihove čustvene potrebe. V študiji prikazujemo, kako osnovnošolski učitelji uporabljajo prehodne predmete in rituale, ki otrokom pomagajo pri prilagajanju na šolo in občutku varnosti. Ugotovitve kažejo, da učitelji te elemente uporabljajo intuitivno, pogosto brez teoretičnega ozadja. Kljub neformalni rabi ti pristopi pozitivno vplivajo na prilagajanje učencev in na klimo v razredu. Poudarjamo pomen vključevanja prehodnih elementov v pedagoško prakso ter potrebo po izboljšanjem usposabljanju učiteljev, osredinjenem na čustveno dobrobit učencev in njeno vlogo v zgodnjem izobraževanju.

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Introduction

Well-being and its definition are changing and therefore it is not easy to define this concept. The current conception is holistic; it encompasses social, emotional, physical, spiritual, and cognitive dimensions of an individual's experience and follows philosophical, ethical, psychological, environmental and economic aspects (Ereaut and Whiting, 2008; McCallum and Price, 2015; Mashford-Scott et al., 2012; Spratt, 2015). Subjective well-being is seen as an individual's perception of well-being and satisfaction of needs. This subjective perception includes self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life and personal growth (Ryff, 1989). The link between educational outcomes and well-being has been the subject of research, and studies show a link between well-being and pupils' educational achievement (Evangelou et al., 2009; Durlak et al., 2011; Shoshani and Slone, 2017).

The well-being of pupils is defined as "a sustainable state of positive mood and attitude, resilience, and satisfaction with self, relationships and experiences at school" (Noble et al., 2008, p. 5). Education aims to equip pupils with competences to gradually take responsibility for their own well-being (Frydenberg et al., 2022; Powdthavee and Vignoles, 2008; Shoshani and Slone, 2017). Well-being is reflected in both the curriculum and educational approaches. Studies emphasize the importance of strengthening peer relationships and children's social-emotional development (Durlak et al., 2011; McCallum and Price, 2015; Norwich et al., 2022). Teaching methods like cooperative learning enhance pupils' subjective well-being (Schultz et al., 1987). Research also shows links between well-being and personal identity (Armstrong et al., 2019; Jackson et al., 2020). The teacher plays a vital role in fostering well-being (Koch, 2018; Samdal et al., 1998). A positive school climate promoting equality, inclusion, and respect significantly impacts well-being (Evangelou et al., 2009; Durlak et al., 2011). Here, we understand well-being as a pathway to living a good life. Schools should ensure pupils feel safe, accepted, and supported, especially during the critical transition from pre-primary to primary school. Creating such environments aligns with theories of human needs that highlight safety and belonging as foundations for well-being and learning (Maslow, 1943; McCallum and Price, 2015).

The need for safety and security is one of the most important feelings we need to experience to be able to regulate our behaviour and understanding of the world. This need is particularly pronounced during early childhood, when a sense of safety and belonging is most crucial. The primary source of safety and security is the primary attachment figure, the caring person. In the earliest years this is usually the mother, but as the child grows, parents, siblings, and extended family become sources of security and safety (Winnicott, 1953; Bowlby, 1969; Fonagy and Target, 2003). Thus, there is a natural, evolutionarily determined attachment bond between the child and the attachment person that is always present; only the quality of the security and sense of safety provided is different (Bowlby, 1969).

As children develop, they increasingly experience separations from their primary caregiver, typically the mother, leading to potential separation anxiety and emotional distress (Mahler et al., 1975). To cope with these experiences, children often adopt strategies that involve forming attachments to specific objects, which serve as symbolic bridges between the presence and absence of the caregiver. Winnicott introduced the concept of the transitional object (TO) to describe an item, such as a blanket or stuffed animal, that provides comfort to the child during times of separation, facilitating the transition from dependence to autonomy (Winnicott, 1953). Bowlby further elaborated on this by discussing the attachment object (AO), emphasizing the role of such objects in providing a sense of security (Bowlby, 1969). Winnicott also described transitional ritual (TR), encompassing behaviours and rituals that offer emotional stability and a sense of continuity, similar in function to transitional objects. He also described the evolution in form and function in alignment with the child's developmental stages and emotional needs (Winnicott, 1991), which has been confirmed by recent studies (David and Norberg, 2022; Chang-Kredl et al., 2024; Stevenson, and Winnicott, 2017; Yamaguchi and Moriguchi, 2020). In her study, Busch (2017) distinguishes between primary transitional objects, unique, irreplaceable items, and secondary transitional objects, which are more socially acceptable objects. A child may also use such an object as a secondary TO a collective transitional object. This is a group of items sharing a common feature that sets them apart from others, serving the same emotional function as a singular object (Busch, 2017) (see Table 1).

Table 1*Overview of key terms related to transitional and attachment objects*

Abbreviation	Term	Definition
TO	Transitional object	Unique object linked to emotional security during separation
AO	Attachment object	Broader term referring to any emotionally significant object
TR	Transitional ritual	Repetitive act with regulatory emotional function
RTO	Transient object	Replaceable item used for emotional bridging in specific contexts
CTO	Collective transitional object	An object shared by a group of pupils

Figure 1 illustrates the developmental trajectory of transitional objects and rituals, showing how their form and function evolve in response to the child's emotional and psychological needs (David and Norberg, 2022; Chang-Kredl et al., 2024; Stevenson, and Winnicott, 2017; Yamaguchi and Moriguchi, 2020). A primary TO is typically the first object to which a child becomes attached. For children who develop this attachment relationship, the absence of the object is experienced as the same intense frustration as the frustration at the absence of the mother. The child with an attachment to the object needs to have it constantly in their presence or to touch it at any time (Dozier and Ayers, 2021). From approximately two years of age onwards, this primary TO tends to be replaced by a more socially acceptable object, called the secondary TO (Rudmin, 1991; Koch, 2018), like a stuffed toy. Thanks to the TO, the child can better cope with stress and regulate its emotions and behaviour in its presence (Borenstein, 2019; Mahalski et al., 1985). Over time, TOs become part of the child's self-concept. Parallel to objects, children engage with TR, predictable, emotionally significant behaviours such as bedtime routines, which evolve from physical closeness (e.g., rocking) to symbolic proximity (e.g., bedtime reading). In later developmental stages, some individuals adopt TRO; these are intentionally replaceable objects chosen by the individual to temporarily fulfil a specific emotional or symbolic function. These facilitate connections to emotionally significant but physically absent aspects of the self or others, contributing to self-identity and confidence. Research indicates that children develop attachments to TRO even when they have no attachment bond to the TO. This reflects a natural aspect of the developmental process through which children form emotional bonds with people and objects (Dozier and Ayers, 2021).

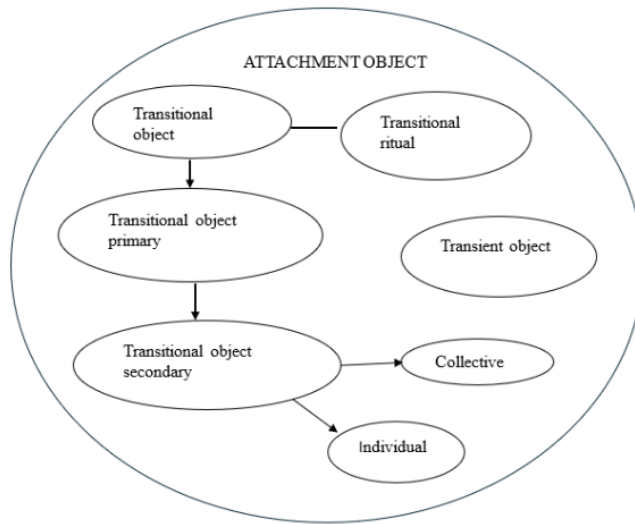


Figure 1

The developmental trajectory of transitional objects and rituals

The interest of researchers in the topic of TO and its importance in human life fluctuates significantly over time, and it is possible to observe in “time waves” from the 1960s (Winnicott, 1953; Bowlby 1969), to the present day. This has also led to an expansion of the notion of the AO into the TO and the RTO (Dozier and Ayers, 2021). Bonding with an AO serves as a crucial strategy for emotional regulation, especially for children exposed to uncertainty within institutional environments. Yet, few contemporary studies provide a systematic analysis of this topic. Ko et al. (2024) examined emotional regulation in university students and found that physical contact with a TO facilitated physiological stress recovery, even though it did not significantly alter their subjective perception of emotional regulation.

Bachar et al. (1997) revealed that TO attachment in childhood correlated with secure attachment styles in adolescence, provided that the object was gradually relinquished in line with developmental needs. In contrast, persistent use in adolescence could indicate emotional distress or relational immaturity. Viberg’s (2003) longitudinal study further demonstrated that children using TOs exhibited better language development, independence, and longer breastfeeding duration, reinforcing the perception of TOs as a normative and beneficial developmental aid. Jones (2002) and Fortuna et al. (2014) also showed that TOs help reduce separation anxiety in institutional settings.

In clinical contexts, Mendez (2020) and Scobee (2023) found that TOs mitigate stress and anxiety in children undergoing medical procedures. Borenstein (2019) described how educators practically accommodate these objects in daily routines, recognizing their emotional utility. These empirical findings underscore the role of TOs and RTOs in supporting children's emotional security and adaptive functioning. However, their significance is also well-established in developmental theory. TOs and RTOs are not only tools of emotional self-regulation, but also fundamental mediators of psychological well-being. According to Winnicott (1953), TOs create a "potential space" in which the child can safely navigate the tension between dependency and autonomy. This space fosters emotional continuity and reduces stress, thereby reinforcing a sense of safety. Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory supports this interpretation, suggesting that secure attachment relationships enhance resilience and psychological stability. Children who engage with TOs during stressful transitions (e.g., first school attendance or hospitalization) demonstrate significantly lower anxiety levels and greater adaptive functioning (Jones, 2002; Mendez, 2020; Scobee, 2023). Thus, TOs and RTOs play a key role in establishing the felt sense of security that underpins children's well-being in educational settings.

Methods

This paper presents partial findings from broader research conducted between December 2023 and January 2024. The aim was to explore Czech primary teachers' awareness of transitional and attachment objects and rituals, and how these contribute to pupils' sense of safety and security. The research questions were as follows:

Q1: What are the experiences of teachers in primary education with TO and TR?

Q2: What other resources do teachers use to ensure a safe classroom environment?

A qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews was used. The questions were formulated using existing instruments (Málková, 2023; Tříšková, 2021). Interview questions focused on four principal areas: Teachers' experiences with TA and TR; observed use of such objects among pupils; strategies employed to foster emotionally safe classroom environments; teachers' attitudes toward the topic and their perceived personal/professional preparedness. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, was conducted at the teacher's workplace, and was recorded using a mobile audio device.

Transcription was performed using automatic speech-to-text software in MS Word, followed by manual corrections. Seven female teachers of 1st to 3rd grade in a Czech city were interviewed using semi-structured interviews and snowball sampling (see Table 2).

Table 2
Characteristics of research sample

Name	Age	Length of practice	Grade
Anna	48	15	3
Beth	25	1	1
Claire	24	3	3
Diana	26	2	1
Eva	62	40	1
Francis	56	32	1
Gina	24	1	3

All participants were informed about the research aims and procedures and gave prior consent. They were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any time without consequences. No identifying information was linked to transcripts or outputs. The study followed the Code of Ethics of the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen (2024).

The MAXQDA program was used for analysis. Data extracts representing key codes and categories were extracted from the responses. Responses were open coded on an ad hoc basis. Individual codes were then grouped into categories, which were analysed by thematic coding (Miles et al., 2014; Yin, 2018). Categories were then compared and grouped into clusters according to the selected criteria (Table 2) and in relation to the selected research questions.

Table 3
Analytical categories induced in qualitative analysis

Categories	Category Descriptions	Subcodes
Formal education	How respondents obtain information	Undergraduate education; interest of teachers
Non-formal education	How respondents obtain information outside formal education	Self-study; colleagues; participation in online platforms
Cooperation with parents	How parents are involved	Parent as initiator; teacher as initiator

Cooperation with the pupil	How child is involved	Student as initiator; teacher as initiator; incidental findings
Experience	Which and how objects are used in the teacher's practice	The characteristics; the dynamics of the pupil's relationship, the pupil's handling
Use of transitional objects and rituals	How does the teacher use these	Conscious/intuitive; classroom/personal
Opinions of colleagues	How colleagues view the use of these	Positive sharing experience; misunderstanding
Supportive environment	In what material ways do teachers help pupils feel comfortable in the classroom	Toys; personal aids; classroom decoration
Class climate	Didactic techniques used by teachers to help children feel comfortable in the classroom	Relationship with the pupil; activities to develop classroom climate

Results

RQ1: What are the experiences of teachers in primary education with TO and AO and rituals?

All seven respondents reported addressing pupils' emotional needs and working with transitional objects (TOs), mostly through intuitive responses to individual needs. For example, Diana, a first-grade teacher, noted: *"So if I see that a child is, like, addicted to an object or fixated on an object, I definitely work with that."* The subcode intuitive use appeared in five interviews; conscious use was mentioned by only one teacher. The results showed that teachers lacked theoretical knowledge about TOs and rituals in education. Six had no prior exposure to the concept during their university studies. For instance, Gina said: *"I have not heard it in school, I have not heard it in practice, I have never been told anything about it."* Only Claire was familiar with the term: *"Some teachers at the university mentioned the concept during lectures, but I personally haven't experienced a seminar on this topic (...) that the college taught us how to include these objects or these rituals in teaching."* Claire was the only one to use TOs consciously. The lack of theoretical knowledge may be why the teachers rated themselves as welcoming and allowing children to bring toys from home into the classroom, but at the same time not allowing them to have these toys with them at times when the child's stress level might be increasing. This is summed up by Beth's statement: *"I allow (having a TO), but I don't allow them to use them during class, to keep the students focused."* Paradoxically, the TO is thus not used when it is needed. An exception was Eva, an experienced teacher, who mentioned the positives of the TO for coping with the adaptation period: *"For some of the children, it's a big help right now, they've been getting used to the school environment, to the new class, to the new team, so they've probably managed the transition better"*

because of that.” Teachers often intuitively respond to pupils’ emotional needs, yet lack theoretical background on transitional objects and rituals, limiting their use during critical moments.

The rituals in the classroom subcategory was found in three responses, though without recognition of these as transitional rituals. The use of transitional rituals is also intuitive, with teachers having the experience that these do help children, but this experience is not supported by theoretical knowledge. Eva stated that *“when we have our morning rituals or in some particular subjects, then I really work better in that class.”* The teachers had a range of rituals. Typically, it was a Monday welcome circle, or a daily greeting coupled with information about what the day would offer for them. In one case, a ritual for the end of the lesson was mentioned, where there was a summary of what the pupils had learned.

Interest in learning more about TOs as a topic in teacher education appeared in three interviews. Respondents expressed doubts about whether they react correctly to the presence of toys or personal objects, and they also encounter ambivalence on this topic among other colleagues. For all the statements, this is expressed by the opinion of Gina, a novice teacher: *“I would be terribly surprised if the child came with a stuffed toy and I wouldn’t really know why he was doing it, and so I would be forbidding him, and actually I wouldn’t be familiar at all with the fact that it’s somehow related to his mind, with his development and so on, so I might even, like, disturb him.”*

RQ2: *What other resources do teachers use to ensure a safe classroom environment?*

Some teachers use “class mascots” in the classroom; these were referenced in three interviews. This is a character or animal that symbolizes belonging to the class and which the teacher uses to motivate various activities. Beth described its use even when a child is not feeling well: *“When the children are not feeling well, they get the panda (a symbol of the class), and they can rest until their parents come for them. They get the panda as comfort, and they can lie on the bench with it.”* So, this is about intuitive use of a CTO. However, even this practice is intuitive, where the actions of others have been taken over without deeper analysis. Claire’s justification for their use is that *“I have seen the rituals in practice, when we were in college, (...), so one is intuitively inspired and then wants to use it later in practice.”* This approach, that an object can help a child to integrate into the classroom collective and perceive himself as part of it, was rejected by one respondent, Gina: *“I try to treat my pupils more maturely already. For me, definitely from third grade onwards, a stuffed animal, or any mascot--no.”*

Teachers also strive to establish a personal relationship through frequent communication with the children, sharing their concerns and interests and time spent with them. The relationship with the pupil was mentioned five times. For example, Eva stated, *“I try to give them my time, so that I don’t even leave for those little breaks to learn about them.”* According to some of the respondents, personal relationships include the possibility of physical touch (stroking), which some younger children may require, but some respondents find physical contact between teacher and child unacceptable. Eva also mentioned a mailbox where the child can write any message at any time either to her or to one of the other children. Class rules were also mentioned to feel secure for the children, and the existence of a “class leader”- the one who takes care of the classroom environment.

Neither the length of teaching experience nor individual parenting experience was a factor in the respondents’ attitudes and opinions. The personality setting and level of empathy of the teacher as well as the culture of the school seemed to be the key elements. These two subcodes were each present once. For example, novice teacher Claire found it difficult to bear her colleague’s disapproval. *“I have to admit that I had periods where I felt sorry for myself and I needed to vent it, even with maybe the guidance counsellor, to make sure that I was doing it right because I hadn’t been in the practice that long. So maybe I would have let myself get pushed around, but in hindsight I’m glad I didn’t and that I stood my ground.”*

The model (Figure 2) illustrates how formal and informal teacher education, cooperation with pupils and parents, and the teacher’s personal experience contribute to the awareness, detection, and pedagogical handling of children’s emotional needs, especially in relation to TO and TR. These processes lead to either intuitive or conscious pedagogical responses that help foster a safe and emotionally supportive classroom climate.

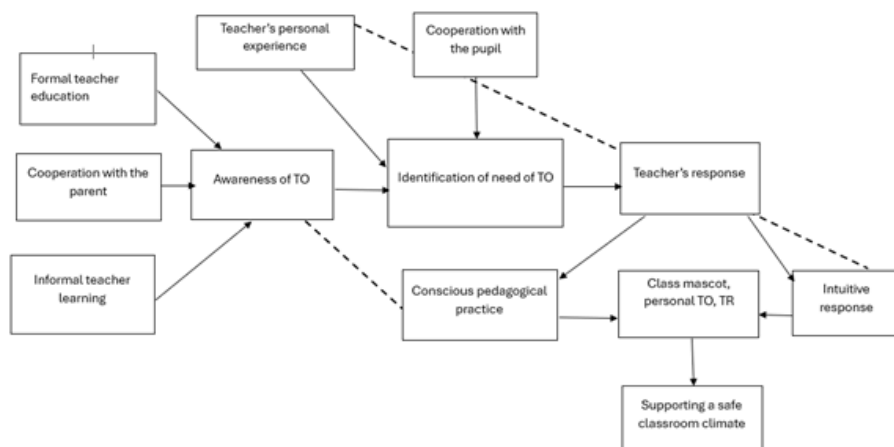


Figure 2

A conceptual model of teacher practices influencing the use of transitional objects

Conclusion and discussion

The issue of well-being and its provision during education is complex. At the very beginning of schooling, it is crucial to make pupils feel safe and to facilitate their adaptation to the school's way of working. Teachers need to have theoretical knowledge of psychology that enables them to act and organize the classroom environment and educational reality in a way that is in line with the needs of individual pupils. However, our study shows that teachers lack erudition in this area. Intuitively, they strive to create a safe environment, but act based on personal experience and in imitation of other teachers' approaches. In situations where discrepancies arise between their own pedagogical approach and the prevailing norms within their school context, pre-service teachers often lack a robust conceptual framework on which to rely. This underscores a legitimate need to reinforce transdisciplinary approaches (Loudová Stralczyńska and Koželuhová, 2022) in teacher education programs, which would provide a broader application of psychology knowledge to pedagogical practice.

At the same time, it is necessary to include in the course's material concerning well-being in its entirety. The study revealed that respondents use very few resources to promote a safe classroom climate. They intuitively use alternative CTO and TO, during which pupils can get to know each other by sharing. It is mainly to enhance

the development of their socio-emotional skills (McCallum and Price, 2015; Norwich et al, 2022).

However, if we think of well-being as a process that focuses not only on a set of individual activities operating in the here and now, but as a process that supports sustainable development, then we need to focus on the way in which the learner is also engaged. In this concept, the influence of the environment (personal, classroom, school) on the pupil as well as the emotional support of TO and RTO play a key role. Objects that have a link to the home can be considered as bridges. The classroom space can be thought of as a place of safety to which the children also have a responsibility; for example, they can participate in decorating the class and taking care of plants and pets. The presence of flowers and pets is welcome, given the empirical findings that emotional well-being and overall health can be improved through contact and bonding with a living animal (King, 2011; Crump and Derting, 2015). The transition to school can be emotionally demanding for young children.

It is important to recognize that the significance of transitional objects extends beyond their immediate regulatory function. Empirical studies suggest that early use of TOs may have long-term implications for the development of secure attachment patterns, provided that the object is relinquished in accordance with the child's developmental trajectory. A longitudinal study by Bachar et al. (1997) demonstrated that children who used TOs in early childhood and discontinued their use before adolescence were more likely to develop secure attachment styles during adolescence. Conversely, persistent attachment to TOs into adolescence was associated with elevated psychological stress and relational immaturity. These findings emphasize the potential of TOs not only as tools for managing acute stress during transition, but also as foundational elements in fostering long-term emotional resilience and relational security. Within the context of promoting well-being in educational settings, this underscores the importance of teacher sensitivity to such transitional signals and highlights the need to integrate this awareness into teacher education curricula.

The use of TO and TR, RTO and CRO in education has not yet received sufficient attention in studies. Nor is there data on the proportion of pupils who require such an approach. Existing studies describe between 50% and 70% of children under 7 years of age as having a TO, but there are transcultural differences (Lee, and Hood, 2021). Accordingly, at least half the children in classrooms could have a TO. Their presence in close personal proximity or deliberate work with TO, TR, RTO and

CRO would facilitate children's adaptation to the school environment, or alleviate the stress associated with school.

However, our research suggests that teachers rarely identify a child with a need for a TO. This confirms that this is a topic in which they are insufficiently informed. These findings have implications not only for pedagogical practice but also for children's well-being. As studies have shown, well-being in educational settings is closely linked to a range of health outcomes, including reduced anxiety, improved emotional regulation, and stronger immune and neuroendocrine functioning (e.g., King, 2011; Crump and Derting, 2015). When teachers recognize and respond to the individual needs of pupils, rather than exclusively focusing on academic performance, they contribute to a classroom climate that supports both mental and physical health.

Limitation

A limitation of the study is the small sample of respondents. Nevertheless, it provides insights and questions that should be asked. It stimulates discussion about how to practically implement pupil learning, of which ensuring pupils' well-being is a natural part, without resigning them to academic achievement (Clarke, 2020), and how to prepare prospective teachers to identify pupils' individual learning needs. Finally, it points to the importance of systematically incorporating TO and TR into teaching practice and strengthening teacher preparation in well-being.

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